

## Co-design: an approach in the co-production of urban space

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### 1- DIY streets Fenham (Newcastle upon Tyne)

#### Project overview

This paper **reports on ESRC Impact Acceleration Account** funded work involving the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at Newcastle University and Sustrans – a leading UK charity that champions sustainable transport. The research sought to **reflect on engagement practice and propose a co-production framework** based on **inspirational participation**. As such, it intends to explore and test alternative co-design approaches to complement and augment the widely-trialled **DIY Streets project whose remit is to help local communities to redesign their neighbourhoods**, making them more attractive, and conducive to walking and cycling. Sustrans and the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at Newcastle University engaged in this process with view to **sharing and mutually influencing each others' approach to engagement and co-design**; but as the process developed, questions emerged around the meaning of **co-production, empowerment and open-ended process** in the current governance structure of funding and delivery of projects.

#### Physical and socio-economic background – urban context

**The DIY Street Fenham project emerges out of the Cycling City Ambition Fund (CCAF1) agenda that Sustrans delivers on behalf of Newcastle City Council.** The DIY Street project identifies Fenham residents using the 'Mosaic UK Consumer and Demographic Data'.

The DIY streets **case study** is **set** in the neighbourhood of **Fenham** in Newcastle upon Tyne and more specifically a **car-dominated street**, where parking on pavement occurs and where public space is very limited. Yet, the street has two key civic institutions for residents and nearby community: the local Library and Community Pool, which are perceived as **civic hubs**. Furthermore, local schools and an allotment area behind the Library and Pool make up a large and varied group of potential stakeholders in the area.

Here **Fenham is considered as primarily working class** enterprising individuals (23.3%) as well as **low-income council households** with a dependence on benefits (19.5%). Although the DIY Streets case study is set within a car-dominated street, there is also a level of low income families without cars (16.8%) defined as '**close knit communities**' with

**family ties** near-by and generally living in older houses. As a result **Fenham has a relatively low income, less affluent socio-economic background** within the wider Newcastle City area, although there is a slight juxtaposition to this with a small number of younger families living in newer homes (9.2%).

### Sustrans and Newcastle University: complementary methods and approaches

To ensure **delivery within the timeframe** agreed and accountability of the project, **Sustrans operated a need-based engagement approach**, which consisted of implementing a logical sequence of events (such as activities in the local school, walk-about, family treasure hunts, planting) to answer the following questions:

1. What is the neighbourhood **now**?
2. What should **we** focus our attention?
3. What **we** don't like and what we would like to see?

**Participants mainly pointed out areas where car-pedestrian conflicts occur, as well as the lack of maintenance of the public realm; in addition they generally suggested practical solutions to negative issues.**

**Seven design ideas emerged from these answers while Sustrans reported a low level of response from the community at the events organised.**

**Newcastle University became involved** in the DIY street Fenham project a few months after it had been initiated and aimed in the first instance at situating within the engagement work that had already started. An **open-ended approach facilitated by installing site-specific prototypes was implemented** in order to **transform the perception of the place and engage people in thinking *beyond now*** as well as the preconceived views and perceived restrictions (Granath, 2001). "Being asked about what they want, [people] may have problems conceptualising their wishes, articulating them even to themselves and even more communicating them."

## **2 – From collaborative planning to co-production**

**Collaborative planning** literature focuses on the importance of participatory approaches that **enhance the role of citizens in the place making process** (Healey 1998). Indeed, the **DIY Street project aspires to 'work closely with local communities to help them redesign their neighbourhoods [...], putting people back at their heart'** (Sustrans DIY streets Newcastle website) <sup>1</sup>. Such collaborative approach primarily emphasises the debate within the **planning stages** yet does **not** necessarily consider the subsequent **delivery and management stages**

**of projects** (Watson, 2014, 71). With these issues in mind, Brownill and Parker (2010) and Watson (2014) have stressed a **turn from a collaborative to a coproduction approach**, in other words from debate to action.

### Co-production as Political Process

The origins of **co-production** lie within the context of delivering goods or services and it's most generally **defined as a process**, which involves **individuals from different organisations** (Ostrom, 1996: 1073), including "professionalized service providers (in any sector) and service users or other **members of the community, where all parties make substantial resource contributions**" (Bovaird, 2007, 847).

Admittedly, this increased responsibility/engagement of users relieves some 'burdens' on the state yet it "has major implications for democratic practices beyond representative government because it locates users and communities more centrally in the decision-making process" (Bovaird, 2007, 846). A result of this is the **potentiality of co-production working beyond the "established rules and procedures of governance in terms of engagement with the state"** (Watson, 2014, 71).

### Co-production as a mutually supportive community: from citizens to stakeholders

It is widely assumed that citizens have a "knowledge built up through their day-to-day experience of a place" (Healey, 1998, 1539). Whilst this is considered an asset within partnerships between state and society, **the real transformative process of co-production lies not in what citizens can say or need but "what they can do"** (Moulaert, 2000, quoted in Albrechts, 2013, 56). This starts to **unearth skills and assets** people may hold not for the benefit of the state agencies but **empowering themselves contributing towards "the building of strong, resilient and mutually supportive communit[y]"** (p.57). This also reflects a level of **empowerment whereby citizens engage with a political process "to secure changes in their relations with government and state agencies in addition to improvement of basic services"** (Mitlin, 2008: 352). Co-production thus suggests a process of "skilling and empowering marginalized communities to manage their own living environments, to deal effectively with state structures [...]" (Watson, 2014, 71).

## Role of built environment practitioners and planners

With the **shift of the citizens becoming key stakeholders**, the role of the built environment **practitioner** and planner also **evolves from providing expertise to one of providing guidance and community support**. This is not to say that the built environment practitioner and planner relinquish their expertise, but rather it suggests a level of “guidance without controlling all the processes” (Watson, 2014, 69). As a result, **co-production practitioners intend to “ask the right questions’ rather than provide all the answers, should assist the community in ‘finding answers for themselves’, and should be able to bring together physical and social aspects of the process”** (Watson, 2014, 69).

### **3 – Inspirational participation as an approach to co-production**

Particularly relevant for practitioners of the built environment facilitating co-production processes is the **inspirational participation approach in that talk and debate become less relied upon than “showing and learning by doing”** (McFarlane, 2011, quoted in Watson, 2014, 72). This opens up different experiential ways of both communicating and gaining knowledge (Watson, 2014, 72).

**Inspirational participation** could be a misleading term as, in the design research literature, it implies the creation of cultural **probes to gather inspirational data for the design practitioner** (Gaver, 1999). However, **borrowing the inspirational approach** from design research is also a “**way of drawing into the future and the unknown, using imagination as the basis for expression**” (Sanders, 2005). Within the context of co-production, **inspirational participation is an approach to stimulate imagination of all stakeholders involved, not only design practitioners**. As argued by Vines et al. (2013) “**participation becomes [a] practice where new ideas, processes and ‘lenses’ are introduced to provoke change**”.

### Co-design framework: Making Telling Enacting

Within a **co-design framework**, Sanders (2013b) brings to the fore **three interconnected and complementary activities** involved in co-designing, namely: **making, telling and enacting**. We drew the **approach of inspirational participation using these 3 activities**, thus enabling to operate within a dynamic cycle with stakeholders where:

**Making** refers to the **use of our hands to embody ideas** in the creation of physical artefacts. If utilised in the earlier stages of the design

process, artefacts will be likely **to describe experiences and narratives**. Examples of this may include **collages, mappings**, mock-ups and small-scale models (Sanders 2013a).

**Telling** refers to a **verbal description of the future use** and potential scenarios such as stories, movie **making and storyboards**. There maybe certain **limitations** within this activity in regards to the ability of people having the verbal vocabulary to express their own tacit knowledge (Sanders, 2013a, 2013b).

**Enacting temporary settings to allow the use of the body in the environment in expressing ideas of potential future experiences** as well as “disrupt naturalised assumptions and **to defy conventions about how to interpret places**” (Tardiveau, Mallo, 2014).

What follows is a reflection on **4 key moments in the project** and how **an inspirational participatory cycle** could articulate the co-production process:

1. Sensory Mapping  
The Sensory Mapping consists of a physical model (at 1:200) portraying the street that is more recognisable than a scaled plan. The model includes elements that were “mysterious and elusive” (Gaver et al., 2004, 55) aiming to awake existing senses and evoke an imaginary feel for the street.
2. Street Trial  
Mobile benches intended to inhabit and enact the street.
3. Focus Group  
Large photographs were used to facilitate a discussion between stakeholders and prompted ideas previously shared during the events. Through sketching over the photographs, the ideas were rendered tangible and users immersed themselves in a process of envisioning an ordinary ambiance that could become remarkable.
4. Temporary Public Space  
A temporary public space was built to enact previous telling and making. The space enabled the participants to tell in both verbal and embodied ways.

## **4 - Situating co-production within the current governance structure of funding and delivery of projects**

**Through co-production, stakeholders work together towards the delivery of an outcome they jointly define.** The **knowledge gained is tangible** and while, in the first instance, it might not influence policy-making, it has the capacity to spread as an embodied practice, a **knowledge and experience engraved in the body that remains longer**

**than a discursive process.** In the case study presented, residents after having enacted the temporary space for a few days formed a focus group and applied for funding to build a **permanent pocket park, a social space in the public realm.** The Local councillor stated that: **‘This Pocket Park has provided the opportunity for the first time for all stakeholders and institutions to sit together around a table to envisage a future for the area.’**

Particular pertinent would be to articulate the **limitations of co-production within the current governance structures of the funding and delivery of projects.** An open-ended process might **clash** with limited **human and financial resources** when projects have to meet stringent timeframes.

However, as suggested in the case study, **inspirational participation** can be brought forward as a **mindset to ignite a process that goes beyond the known limitations** and responses of the now and where stakeholders can “acquire and [...] sustain a position in the place making process” (Andres, 2013, p14).

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